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STUDENT ESSAY

THE AMERICAN OFFICER CORPS:
A PERSPECTIVE 1974-1986

BY

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

**THE AMERICAN OFFICER CORPS:
A PERSPECTIVE 1974-1986**

AN INDIVIDUAL ESSAY

by

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It appeared to this observer that the image of the US Army Officer Corps was tarnished in 1974, and that there was a lack of trust between senior officers and mid-level officers which had an influence on the Army's effectiveness.

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THE AMERICAN OFFICER CORPS: A PERSPECTIVE 1974-1986

INTRODUCTION

'All General-officers are crooked,' said my friend, an American officer, as we entered the Eisenhower auditorium at US Army Command and General Staff College for a lecture on ethics. I remembered answering somewhat defensively that we all liked to exaggerate, especially about Generals. To my surprise he stopped, looked straight at me and said: 'This is no joke. I mean it, we mean it. Wait and you will see what I mean.'

I think this and the subsequent seminar discussions were my final eye-openers that something was wrong in the American officer corps.

It was in the early 1970s. I had been selected by the Norwegian Army to attend US Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC), in the class of 1974. This was my first meeting with the US Army. It turned out to be a very rewarding year, both from a professional and social standpoint. The early 1970s were dynamic times in the US society and I had the privilege to observe, learn, and discuss with a very able American and Allied student body at this prestigious Army College.

The Vietnam war was over. Very few wanted to call it a war and preferred to call it "a conflict." Among the American officers there was the obvious feeling of having lost the war, although nobody ever admitted that they had lost tactically any battles, small or big. On the contrary, very many were proud of the Army's tactical achievements and how the soldiers had fought.

The Watergate scandal filled the news media every day in a way that almost stunned us foreigners.

One day we woke up to the fact that the President had put all armed forces on alert because of the developments in the Yom Kippur war. The

discussions did not concentrate so much on the developments in the Middle East, as they tended to question the President's rationale. Did he do it for domestic political reasons, to show the Americans that they had a vigorous President, despite Watergate, or was the military situation really that serious?

The energy shortage became obvious and gas prices soared. At the same time the highway speed limit was reduced to 55 mph. Newspapers reflected people's lack of confidence in those in charge of governmental institutions and the Armed Forces were rated low.

The Army went for an All-Volunteer Army and was very unsure as to what the outcome would be. Initial recruiting went very slowly and many questioned the quality of the recruits.

In the society itself there was a feeling of self-pity. An editorial ran in several newspapers and depicted how the Americans always had to stay alone, despite the will to help people all over the world, and how they received reluctance and enmity instead of gratitude when they gave help and support. This theme was repeated daily in the media and even the music industry produced records on the theme which sold well. For Americans, it was an agonizing time and this influenced the officer corps and marked their attitudes.

Twelve years later I was selected to attend the US Army War College (AWC), being the first Norwegian officer to attend both the CGSC and the AWC.

In the intervening years, I had not been in the United States. My perceptions about the United States in the meantime were shaped by my experiences, by extensive professional reading, by Norwegian media, and by discussing US issues with visiting Americans.

When I returned in 1985 I found the mood of the American people and officers so changed that it was almost unbelievable. Some words from a Chrysler commercial described precisely the new mood: "The Pride is Back. The confidence is back. The good feeling about 'Made in America' is back."

What happened is history, and indeed very exciting history. What happened within the officer corps is also very exciting and surely will be analyzed by researchers and historians. From my perspective I shall try to describe how I perceived my classmates at CGSC compared to those at the AWC. Hoping to avoid such pitfalls as derived from the differences in size and selection process, I shall rather simply highlight some of the changes from a highly personal standpoint.

My task has been made easy by the glaring positive changes that have occurred over the last 12 years. The Army appears so much stronger and better than 12 years ago. The officers I meet display confidence, dedication, and pride in the Army in a way that I never experienced in Leavenworth.

THE ETHICAL QUESTIONS

Probably the most sensitive and serious questions in 1973-1974 were related to Army ethics. The incident described in the introduction preceded some very open, frank and difficult discussions involving several senior officers summoned to CGSC by the then commanding general, MG John H. Cushman. I was surprised at how outspoken my classmates were in the presence of a general, quite to the contrary of what had been the case so far in the course. The focus of the discussions were such professional values as honesty, integrity and competence.

Almost immediately problems from the Vietnam war surfaced in a choir of voices reflecting frustration with statistics as a prime management tool, falsification of reports, OER-practices, coverup (CYA)-practices, emphasis on zero defects, and dishonest practices by senior officers to "keep everything green." Communication in my seminar became very difficult when the general attending our section grew very angry and expressed disbelief that the students held such attitudes, and denied the existence of such practices in his command in Vietnam. The situation was not eased when one of the students told the General that he was in his command in Vietnam.¹

What I remembered most from the session was the deep mistrust displayed by the midlevel officers toward the generals that represented different levels of Army leadership. During the following days and weeks I was given more information and examples that amplified my perception of distrust as we continued the discussions both in class and outside.

In my opinion, no Army can live with such an open distrust between senior and junior leaders without suffering badly with regard to morale and combat readiness.

I saw a small, but important, segment of the midlevel officer corps demanding honesty, integrity and competence from their superiors in an Army in which they insisted that institutional practices and personal behavior neither displayed nor encouraged these important elements of professionalism.

It was quite natural in this context to see how my classmates displayed and adhered themselves to the values they said were lacking. It is impossible to be totally fair and objective in this connection. I

met many officers that in their whole lifestyle displayed true professionalism. But many did not, even though they knew how it should be and had good counsel for their superiors. Some were indifferent and tended to say that improving Army ethics was a problem for the Chief of Staff, and not for individual officers.

They also tended to be quite relaxed in the situation, displaying the attitudes that had become common among American youth: Liberal and critical of traditional social ideals, work, and religion. These attitudes were in contrast to the traditional military ideals as expressed in Duty-Honor-Country.

During the discussions on a whole range of subjects I could from time to time sense what is called "ethical relativism,"² the blurring of right and wrong, where the erosion of a sense of right and wrong, in favor of a "no-fault" society, poses a threat to sound ethical judgments.

It was sad to note that a number of officers of the CGSC class of 1974 demanded professionalism from their superiors without necessarily adhering to the same values themselves.

This could also be observed in many ways from their unwillingness to prepare themselves for class, read the required readings, prepare for discussions, or follow army regulations on more minor matters.

They criticized the Army, the system, and previous superiors when a certain amount of self-criticism would have been more appropriate. The prevailing Army climate as displayed in Leavenworth had another byproduct of significance for the Army. Very few of the officers could even think of recommending their sons to join the Army. Perhaps this is one of the most telling examples that something was wrong.

The hostile attitude towards the many generals that took part in our seminar on ethical issues became difficult for me to understand when the Chief of Staff of the Army, General Creighton W. Abrams, showed up to talk to the Class of 1974. The warm reception he was given by the students, surpassed anything that I have experienced in the US, displaying a confidence in the Chief of Staff that was in great contrast to what had emerged through the previous discussions. One would imagine that an officer holding senior positions as General Abrams did during the Vietnam-era, would indeed be viewed in the same light as many other senior officers. That this was obviously not the case says something about that Chief's true professional character that is difficult to explain with words.

The American society was not willing to support its Army in Vietnam. The erosion of values in the society itself had a parallel in the erosion of values in the Army. It may show how deeply the officer corps in the US is rooted in its society and how closely societal trends affect the Army and its deepest values.

An Army with a divided officer corps is a seriously handicapped Army. The American Army in 1974 reflected the society, and the old saying that a country gets the Army she is willing to support proved true in this case.

With this background I was most curious as to what kind of officers I would meet in the United States in 1985. The selection process for a Senior Service College (SSC) is very competitive. Consequently fewer officers attend a SSC than attend a CGSC. The quality of those selected represents the top officers in the US Army. Even with that in mind, I

believed it possible to compare the 1986 student with the 1974 student, at least on such basic elements as professionalism and ethical conduct.

Much had happened in the meantime, both in the US and the western world. The armies were better trained, and displayed quality and pride. In this respect, I could observe an international trend. However, other western armies did not inherit post-Vietnam problems and domestic political turmoil as did the US Army. The officers I should meet were commissioned at approximately the same time as my classmates in Leavenworth; in fact I met some of them again, both among the students and the faculty.

The first course in Carlisle was "Requirements for the Professional Leader." From the outset we started to unwrap attitudes on professionalism, but this time without the deep-felt misgivings towards the senior leadership that had been so typical in 1974.

I met officers that felt strongly on ethical issues and tended to display rather puritanistic views. In class and outside I witnessed how behavior followed the ruling ethical values. Attitudes and behavior were in harmony and I found almost no traces of ethical relativism. Quite early I became aware of the efforts undertaken by the Army to improve the professional climate. Obviously my classmates regarded the initiatives as very important and behaved as if the initiatives were their own.

I read the US Army War College "Study on Military Professionalism" of June 30th 1970 and its more recent followups.

Reading the 1970 study was like going back to Leavenworth again. For the Army leadership, the confidence gap in the early 1970s could have been of no surprise after reading the AWC report. Perhaps the

vehement CGSC student reactions in 1974 were unexpected; however no one could dispute that something had to be done.

The numerous related papers, studies, and essays and the Army's emphasis on values, show how things began to take shape, influencing attitudes and behavior to a remarkable degree.

I have discovered disagreement between the Army leadership and the colonel level officer corps also in 1986. It is sufficient to mention the case of the Army of Excellence (AOE) and the light divisions, which raises a lot of emotions among the AWC students. However, the discussion is different. Nobody challenges the professional values of the decisionmakers. They may disagree on professional concepts and have second thoughts on the decisionmaking process. Both are healthy displays of professional involvement versus indifference. The ethical question is where one may trespass the limit of loyalty. This question has been addressed by the students in such a manner as to display another element of their professional awareness and responsiveness.

Looking upon changes in a 12 year timespan, in an area where changes are so obvious and easily detectable, I have asked myself whether the pendulum has been allowed to go to the extreme other end. Certain discussions might indicate that this is the case. In the middle of the apparent optimism I can detect an element of intolerance towards common human weaknesses, a tendency to raise ethical goals to a degree where few human beings can follow or where the human dimension is disregarded. In doing so one may develop a guilt feeling or at least a situation in which conscience is raised so often that one may become immune. In setting goals higher than most people consider reasonable, one may also encourage reduced respect for rules and regulations. An

example may be the commanding officer being reprimanded for having a beer for dinner 3 days ahead of a Reforger exercise, breaking his own regulation. The issue is not the reprimand, but to issue regulations that exceed what is reasonable. In this case it is also interesting to note that this relates to alcohol consumption, a case for very different practices between 1974 and 1986 which I shall comment on later. Some of the cases for AWC discussion about ethics revealed that US officers and International Fellows had a different attitude. Each group would approach the cases differently, the US students selecting the most puritan approach. Without being able to remember details, this is in contrast to some of my experiences in Leavenworth discussions.

The bottom line, however, is that officers in approximately the same year groups that I met in Leavenworth have a much more sound and healthy outlook when we are talking about ethics and values. The reason why is beyond the scope of this essay; however,

- o The officers sensed that a change was needed.
- o The Army leadership's goal setting and interest.
- o Changes in the American society towards more conservative values and traits closer to the Army's code: Duty-Honor-Country.

In the time that has elapsed since 1974, some excellent officers, with potential for the highest positions, have chosen to leave the Army because of its seemingly insensitivity towards dealing with the ethical problems in the early 1970s. Today I don't hear much about leaving the Army as soon as possible. On the contrary, with today's opportunities for professional challenges and demanding education within the Army in an environment where ethical values and professionalism are honored, the

officers are eager to stay as long as possible. Unlike in 1974, they again seem to encourage their children to seek a military career.

OTHER ELEMENTS OF CHANGE

Race relations were hot issues in 1974. The country had been in some very demanding internal riot situations based on race relations and Army units had been mobilized. Although the Army probably was one of the institutions in the US that handled race relations best, the leadership was concerned. In our leadership program at CGSC, race relations played a very important part. Some of the discussions revealed strong emotions and showed that the concern was indeed valid. Discussions revealed discriminating practices and a lack of equal opportunity.

The 1986 program at the AWC does not display an equal concern about race relations. Race relations are not an important issue among the officers I meet in 1986. I don't know what has happened in the meantime. Based on my perceptions, it seems as though the Army has handled this issue so well, and continues to do so, that any problems are less distinguishable than before. In some ways this may also reflect changes in the society; however, the picture revealed by the newspapers shows that there are still problems. Discrimination, tensions based on color, and lack of equal opportunities are still a part of the American's everyday life as highlighted by the national holiday celebrating Martin Luther King's birthday.

Another thing that startled me in 1974 was drinking habits. The consumption of alcohol was very high, compared to standards that I was familiar with. I discovered that some officers followed the custom of

supplementing their lunch with beer and hard liquor while others joined regularly for happy hour in the officers club or civilian establishments. There is no doubt that alcohol reduced the amount of effective study hours and had a detrimental effect on the development of professional competence in 1974. At the same time certain statistics showed that alcohol was a real problem, both among officers and NCO's. I noticed that on the one hand there was the tendency to blame superiors for lack of competence while on the other hand some of the officers themselves misused their study time by intoxicating themselves to an extent that precluded effective study practices.

This discrepancy between stated and desired traits and actual personal performance was part of the 1974 picture.

Both the Army and society had, in my opinion, a rather relaxed attitude towards driving while intoxicated (DWI). It was amazing to witness the alcohol consumption that was regarded as acceptable together with driving. To be apprehended by the police and charged with driving while intoxicated, serious things had to happen. Coming from a country that put a man in jail for 21 days if he had .5 pro mille or more of alcohol in his blood and obviously intended to drive, the American way was difficult to comprehend.

The year 1986 represents quite a change. Although society regulations still are relaxed compared to many other countries, the prevailing attitude among officers is that DWI is unacceptable. In this case the Army seems to be ahead of the society, leading the way towards stricter regulations and practices.

Alcohol consumption among the officers seems to have decreased remarkably and a picture of moderation is the best description I can give of a practice that earlier was unsatisfactory.

I see this moderation in effect among the officers all the way from watching sporting events and socializing at home to the more formal occasions where alcohol in various forms has its place on the table.

The Scandinavian custom of always having an alcohol free wine option has also been introduced and represents another element of changing customs.

When the yearly physical fitness test was announced at CGSC, several sections undertook crash programs to improve student physical fitness during the few days that were left before the test. In my section, our "Doc" was demanded to give his advice, which he certainly did.

To state it quite bluntly, the physical fitness of the students was unimpressive; however, the same can be said about the requirements. In this case the officer corps reflected the surrounding society. When I jogged on the roads in the Leavenworth area, it was quite often that friendly people in bypassing cars stopped to ask if they could give me a ride. I thought it was quite funny.

The change in 12 years is amazing. Officers are seen everywhere on and off post, jogging or bicycling. Many of their wives do physical training regularly and the surrounding community is so used to joggers that drivers don't lift an eyebrow when they see them. Approximately 75 percent of the AWC students do physical training three times or more per week. Very few of the students have problems with the requirements, nor do they have difficulties with the new and increased requirements.

Good programs and guidelines are available and the Army Physical Fitness Research Institute (APFRI) is conducting intensive research programs in support of the new drive.

Related aspects as nutrition and diet now have the officers' and their families' attention. Our class of 1974 never spoke about body fat, even if many of the officers could display a significant amount of it, quite to the contrary of what I see today. Probably only the medical doctors knew about cholesterol, although quite a few knew about tobacco smoke health hazards. Stress handling programs as well as type A behavior modification programs add to mark today's Army's interest in physical well-being and subsequently an officer corps more fit to withstand stress in peace and war. My discussions with today's classmates reveal that the Army has been very successful in getting an important and very influential part of the officer corps to voluntarily go along with an extensive physical training program that was unthinkable in 1974.

In Leavenworth we quickly made contact with American military families. It took us a short time to realize how the Vietnam tours strained family relations in a number of ways. In many cases the Leavenworth year was the first year for a long time where the families suddenly found themselves living together in an Army community. Most of the families had a harmonious life, but there were visible signs of matrimonial infidelity and for too many it became a difficult struggle ending with separations and divorces. I have no statistics to support my perception of a high amount of family breakups, which again put stress on the officers affected and reduced their ability to study effectively. In today's Army a high proportion of officers, NCO's, and

men are married. Their families' well-being has become a focus of the Army leadership in a way that shows a pioneering attitude compared with 1974.

The Army Family White paper of November 1983 together with Action Plans show how the US Army has grown to recognize its responsibility in a way unknown in the mid-70s. I find the program very interesting and worthwhile for study by foreign armies. To what extent the program will succeed, remains to be seen. There is no doubt, however, that I today find a number of initiatives that make life easier for army families and support the goals of partnership, wellness and sense of community between the Army and its families.

A couple of interesting initiatives at the AWC in 1986 could be mentioned. Promotions and the prospect of being promoted have always been a crucial issue in any Army. During one of the courses at the AWC, the wives were encouraged to attend a promotion seminar based on the rules laid down in the Officer Personnel Management System (OPMS). Their recommendations did not significantly differ from those by the US students, which again very much correspond with recommendations by the appointed board.

The insight gained and the feeling of trust in the system will contribute to the elimination of potential feelings from an officer and his wife that he has been passed over without reason. The OPMS also seems to have been very successful. In 1974 the discussions were bitter, concentrating on ticket punching and cronyism as the real basis for selection.

My 1974 classmates denied that the OER was a good assessment of performance. Now the general attitude seems to be that the OER's may

not be perfect, however they are far better than before and are reasonably valid to help select individuals for promotion, command, and other assignments.

Another important development is the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention and Control Program. The knowledge that professional help is available says a lot, no matter if a family takes advantage of it or not. It seems to me, however, that drug abuse has become far more common in the US in recent years, despite initiatives to contain it. Some of the Carlisle experiences are more alarming than anything I can remember from 1974, and cause great concern to both us and US Army families with teenage children.

It now looks as if the problems and burden of drug abuse have moved from being a problem in the old draft army to be a problem for the officer families with teenage children.

The Army's relationship to the media seems not to have improved very much in the last 12 years.

The media played an important, perhaps even crucial, role in Vietnam. Most of my classmates in Leavenworth had hostile feelings towards the media, because of what was perceived as a lack of responsibility and reliability.

The same attitudes can still be seen today, although the words are more moderate when the role of the media is discussed. The Pentagon treatment of the media during the military operation in Grenada is of no surprise to me. Severe restrictions may be the rule of the future if a mutual and respected understanding cannot be created.

The Yom Kippur war in 1973 triggered serious discussions about US operational doctrine. The 1976 edition of FM 100-5, Operations,

reflected many of the lessons learned in the Middle East. In 1982 the US Army published its 1982 edition of the same manual. The professional debate on operational art in the time between the two editions among officers and civilians with special insight was intense, fruitful, impressive, and without previous precedent. Watching the debate from abroad, it was obvious that very many officers contributed with a feeling that this time they were participants in the development and implementation of the new US operational art and not only recipients of a new manual. Perhaps one of the results is that I meet many officers today that are both excited and proud of the new Airland Battle (ALB) doctrine. In a mysterious way they seem to identify themselves with the developments that led to the doctrine and display confidence in its soundness and applicability.

To the extent that this is a general attitude among officers at the Senior Service College level, it represents an important element in the Army's readiness for war, irrespective of how usable the doctrine may be in an objective perspective.

To understand the American military terminology becomes more and more difficult. The use of abbreviations and acronyms is on a steady growth. The intricacies of even an overview of "How the Army runs," are difficult to understand without the knowledge of at least 750 acronyms. No doubt that is why the International Fellow in the class of 86 drew much laughter with his remark that "our system is very much like yours, but we can do it with only 10 acronyms."

I understand the need for precise names and descriptions that can be remembered in an increasingly complex world of new weapons, technology, and tactics. The acronyms and abbreviations serve an

important role in this connection, but their use has reached proportions where you virtually feel that you have to learn a new language where grammar and pronunciation follow no specific rules, except the one "that this is the way we say it."

If it was difficult to follow the instructors in 1974, it is far more demanding, because of acronyms, in 1986.

There are other fields of less importance that could have been mentioned to show how the attitudes of an important segment of the American officer corps has changed. They all add up to professional growth and dedication towards all elements of professionalism.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

My observations of an important segment of US officers show that they are better in 1986 in almost all fields of military professionalism, even when I take into account the different selection process and professional maturity and experience.

To the extent that this has an influence on the Army at large, the American Army is also in far better shape than before. When you have 30 years of experience in an army, you have learned to distinguish excellence from mediocrity and inferiority without necessarily following different units from day to day. In the same manner, many small things may contribute to an early assessment that very often is in concert with findings based on the Army Training and Evaluation Program (ARTEP). It is my perception that almost everything goes far better in the American Army of today compared with 1974. In order to find the reasons, one must also look at changes in the civilian society and the willingness of the President and Congress to appropriate necessary funds to generate

the equipment modernization. Without the additional dollars for this, so far by some estimates to be more than \$1 trillion, the transformation might have been slower and far more difficult. Progress in all fields are easier when you can see visible upbeat results. However, money alone does not explain the positive changes that have taken place. Money cannot buy values like honesty, integrity, and performance. Money alone can neither buy excellent training, nor morale. But because money is such an important element, the US Congress, when discussing what the US has gotten for the additional \$1 trillion in defense, should not overlook the development of an officer corps and an Army observing values and traits that are deeply rooted among the best traditions of the free American society and where the traumatic post-Vietnam syndrome has disappeared. The US Army of 1986 could very well rewrite one of President Reagan's 1984 campaign themes and say: "The US Army is not only back, the Army is looking forward and is going forward."

It is my hope that the US Army leaders and their civilian superiors in the future will never institute rules and practices that invite tradeoffs at the expense of basic ethical values and professionalism that turned out to be so important when we look upon them in a post-Vietnam context. And when the need arises to use the Army, use it with the wisdom and decisiveness that today's excellent Army deserves.

ENDNOTES

1. This seminar has also been described by: a. Major Marc B. Powe, "US Army: The US Army After the Fall of Vietnam: A Contemporary Dilemma", Military Review, February 1976. b. Colonel D. M. Malone, "US Army: The Trailwatcher", Army Magazine, May 1981.
2. Kermit D. Johnson, USA, "Ethical Issues of Military Leadership", Parameters, Vol. IV, No. 2, 1974, pp. 35-39.